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ABSTRACT

A work of literature has no hidden meanings; everything needed for complete understanding is contained within the text. A failure to perceive sense in literature is not a permanent situation, however, nor is the work itself a static phenomenon. The perception of meaning may vary according to the reader's experience, but, strictly speaking, a superficial reading does not denote superficiality on the part of a poem, but rather a failure on the part of the reader to perceive the myriad meanings of the words involved. Illumination for the reader may be encouraged by a teacher, but a personal interpretation, based on careful reading, is essential if the student is to directly experience the literature. Teaching techniques described as "listening" and "bracketing," focusing on the specific meanings of the text itself and directing attention away from irrelevant external assumptions, can promote reader awareness. (KS)

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What's at the Bottom of Literature?

That's a tall order. One gets the impression that if this question could be answered the whole world would stand forth in its revealed meaning. Better to start small.

Here is a little exercise. Perhaps you have seen or done something like this before. If so, you already know its point. If it is new to you, do it now. Read the following statement slowly before reading on:

> Those elements of poetry many English
> teachers wish to teach are the
> THE POET'S IMAGINATIVE VISION
> along with
> THE FIGURES OF SPEECH
> and probably
> THE MAJOR SOUND DEVICES.

Now answer the question--what is most manifestly wrong or off about this statement as written? (You may continue to read it. Prevent yourself from reading ahead beyond the dots. Give yourself about two minutes. Then return to me.)

. . . . . .

Either you saw at once, or you saw after a while, or you never saw at all that there is an extra word--"the"--in the passage. If you never saw the extra "the" or had trouble seeing it at first,

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you were probably very busy trying to psyche me out or the quiz, looking for tricks, putting in complexities where none existed, wondering what all this has to do with the topic of this paper or with literature, or otherwise thrusting your ego into the process. What you weren't doing was seeing what was there to be seen, as clear as a bug on a daisy. If you reread the passage now, you may wonder how it was possible not to have seen what was so obviously there all along. (If you did see the extra "the," you get no extra credit. Big deal. It's staring you right in the face big as life; the achievement is in not seeing it. If you see what I mean.)

You now know everything I have to say about what's at the bottom of literature. If you know what I mean, save yourself valuable time. Forget the rest of this essay, get yourself a beer, and read the poems which are included toward the end of the journal. But if you think you don't know everything I have to say about my subject (you're wrong, you do), please read on.

Rather than attempting to speak about <u>all</u> of literature (epics, tragedies, novels, lyrics, drivers manuals, recipe books, etc.), I will confine myself merely to speaking about one work of literature (though it doesn't matter which one. Supply your own example). I am really asking two questions about the work. What's at the bottom of the work of literature? And how do I know when I have gotten to the bottom of it? The answer to the second question is easier to arrive at. The answer would seem to be that I have gotten to its bottom when I fully understand the work, when I have fully appropriated its language, symbols, ambiguities, organizing principle, persona, narrative techniques, and what have you. All

I have to do--and, of course, it's a lot--is explain all its mysteries, answer all its challenges. It doesn't matter how I appropriate the work:as long as I fully understand it, I have gotten to its bottom. But strange to say, when I fully understand the work, it may still be complex, but it will no longer be mysterious. All its manifest complexity now makes perfect sense to me. The work of literature has no hidden meanings. It isn't challenging in the way I once thought it to be. If, indeed, a work of literature I have read a dozen times still seems opaque or mysterious to me, I certainly feel more frustration than pleasure. For sure I know I have gotten to its botten only when I understand it. I know, for example, that when a friend complains about the hidden meaning of a hard work which, for one reason or another, I happen to apprehend fully, I cannot help but feel that my friend is speaking more about himself or herself than about the work of literature, which I can readily see is nothing if not clear in its implications. Everything about the work speaks to me; all its power and all its meaning stand forth.

What I am saying is that when I totally appropriate the work of literature, I see what is to be seen. I either see the "the" or I don't. It's not hidden. Where could it be hidden? The extra "the" is visible, just like any of the elements of a piece of writing. There is nothing hidden in the work of literature we have selected to look at. Everything one can ever hope to know about the work shows plainly, as clear as a bug on a daisy. I may not <u>see</u> what's there, but that does not mean it is not emphatically showing itself.

I hope that you will not think I am saying that every piece of

literature is equally accessible, that the "Paradise" of the Divine Comedy is as readily accessible as Ben Jonson's "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes." (Though it is if it is. I suppose Teresa of Avila, had she hung around until the seventeeth century would have found Jonson incomprehensible, Dante as clear as a bug on a daisy.) What I am saying is that you either see what's there on the page or you don't. Now, there may be very good reasons why you do or don't see what's on the page. However, I am not dealing with those causes here, but can direct you to a first-rate article which, to my mind, pinpoints these causes: Norman Holland's "Unity Identity Text Self" in PMLA, October, 1975. My focus is on the effects, on that which "happens": namely, if you take in what there is to take in from the work, you get to its bottom; if you don't, you don't.

A failure to see (I would call it a failure to read) is not a static situation. If you can't make head or tail of the piece of literature at first, you may come in time to make sense of it. Your vision may uncloud; you may allow yourself to see what was always there to be seen. Please understand that I am not saying that there is one underlying meaning for all time in our work of literature. If this were true, then there could be no on-going discussion of a work of literature. The last word on Hamlet would have been uttered hundreds of years ago and that would be that. (In some articles I've read, the critic has argued about his or her reading of a work as if there was but one explanation, missed, somehow, for years and years by everyone who had derived joy from the piece.) What I am saying is that whatever meanings the work has at a given moment in history shows plainly. In a seventeenth-

century poem the word "trolley" would have meant "a small cart" and perhaps "a table with wheels" (and all the connotations rising from these denotations). A twentieth-century poem using "trolley" would more likely imply what we mean by "trolley car"--the coach running on tracks with current deriving from wires above it. But given the context in which the word appears in a modern poem, it is possible that one or another definition will gel or all of them. They all show because they are all real definitions of "trolley." None of the definitions is hidden. If I read the poem knowing only the twentieth-century definition of "trolley," I can have a total experience of satisfaction; the poem can cohere and disclose its truth. If I read the poem again five years later after having happened to learn the older definition of "trolley," I may have a different understanding of the poem. It will have changed its meaning over the years. Again I will experience satisfaction. Both readings will have been valid. At no moment in history can I ever hope to get all the possible readings of a work of literature--not as long as time moves on and time means change. If I try to get all the meanings possible, what I wind up with is, at best, knowledge <u>about</u> the poem; at worst, great frustration. No, at any given moment in time, my goal with literature is to experience satisfaction based on the certainty that the meaning I see in the work is actually there. I am at the bottom not when I know everything the work can ever mean to anyone in all times and places (which can never happen), but when I know what the work means for me, totally, here and now. For me this kind of clarification happened last week when I was teaching Brecht's <u>Galileo</u> for the ten millionth

time. I had always spoken of Brecht's ambivalence toward Galileo at the end of the play, about the ambiguities inherent in the three versions of the play, etc. etc. You know, all those things the critics say about the end of this play. This time, with the help of some students who saw, as it were, the two "the's," I got it. I got it. What I had been calling for fifteen years Brecht's ambivalence and the play's ambiguity turned out to be my own inability to read what was plainly there on the page. I repeat: once I saw it clearly, there was nothing ambiguous about it. I hadn't said the last word on the play, but I had finally gotten to a meaning for it which is truly there. I experienced satisfaction myself and certainly about the text. (This is not the place to be tempted into digression about the meaning of Galileo. Such a digression would merely open up for you your agreements and disagreements about the play and we'd be off and running about that.) My point is that what was there to be seen, I hadn't seen--until last week. It had always been there, but I hadn't been.

You may be thinking something like this: "But a work of literature has layers in it, levels of complexity," etc. I wish to say that human beings most certainly have levels of consciousness. Perhaps we even have ids and superegos, even if doctors cannot find them during open-brain surgery. But there is no "unconscious" level in a work of literature. There are no "levels of consciousness" in a poem, play or novel. The words which compromise a text have denotations and connotations, to be sure. One word may have many meanings. But that's what they are: many meanings, not levels of consciousness. Words have no consciousness at all, merely meanings. I want to reiterate the obvious because

it is so seldom said. This work of literature we have been discussing may indeed have seven types of ambiguity. But they all show. The ambiguities, like the "the" in my opening quiz, show. This one work of literature says what it says.

People cloud the issue if they begin to insist that "my interpretation is as good as yours." There is the crucial sense in which that utterance is true, but, let's face it, all too often when I say it I really mean that I am insecure (I have levels of consciousness, to be sure!); I do not see what the work says, so I delude myself into thinking that one guess is as good as another, thereby saving a vestige of self-respect, however shabbily managed. The work of literature says what it says. I do not have to look anywhere but at it. If I am able to see what's actually there, I do not have to go beyond it. The author has put it all on the page. Now, the author, who, of course, does have levels of consciousness, may delude himself or herself about what has been written, but the poem does not delude itself. The words are it. It hides nothing. There is no place to hide anything. There are no layers.

Look at these lines by Robert Frost:

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

What this short poem means is

The-old-dog-barks-backward-without-getting-up.
I-can-remember-when-he-was-a-pup.

Its meaning is not hidden under layers of anything. I may not hear everything the poem is saying, but there are no crannies

where Frost could have hidden anything. "The old dog" means "the old dog"; "barks" means "barks"; "backward" means "backward." To be sure, "old dog" also means anything that "old dog" means, as in "Mr. Bonin sure is an old dog." "Backward" means many things too. But whatever it means, it means. No more and no less. It's all in the words themselves. It's not the poem's fault if I do not get it. I may do a superficial reading, but that says nothing about the work of literature, only something about me. Strictly speaking, there is not top or superficial level; there is only my failure to see that the words have more than one meaning. The more meanings I see the more I will get from the poem. The poem itself, though, has no superficial level. And if there is no top level, it follows, as night the day, that there is no bottom.

What is at the so-called bottom of the work of literature is what's at the top: all that is there, always totally visible and hearable, unhidden, staring us in the face, as clear as a bug on a daisy. Before the Western world had telescopes to see exactly what was what with the solar system, we imagined and built our religions on the notion of planetary bodies, permanently affixed to crystalline spheres. Lives for centuries were run on this belief. All Renaissance science had to do was look through the telescope and see what was what--that Jupiter had moons which disappeared behind it--in order to realize that no one since the beginning of time had ever understood heaven, standing forth in all its clarity, waiting, as it were, to be seen. Literature too, to paraphrase (with apologies) a remark of Albert Einstein, hides its so-called secrets in its infinite grandeur.

But look. Even though the work of literature is what it is,

without top or bottom, it does seem as if some works of literature are hard or deep or shallow or serious or easy or moving or boring or frustrating or illuminating or shattering or timeless or timely or trivial. Or a combination: serious but tedious, deep and illuminating, hard but timeless, frustrating but profound.

Let's see the mechanism at work behind these responses. Read the following poem three times.

Landscape, Deer Season
Snorting his pleasure in the dying sun
The buck surveys his commodious estate,
Not sighting the red nostrils of the gun
Until too late.

He is alone. His body holds stock-still,
Then like a monument it falls to earth;
While the blood-red target-sun, over our hill,
Topples to death.

Now decide for yourself what you think is true of this poem. Is it hard? Easy? Deep? Shallow? Serious? Silly? Moving? Dull? Frustrating? Vague? Bad? Good? Illuminating? Timely? Timeless? Trivial? A combination? (If so, of what?) None of the above? (If so, what then?) After you have come to your conclusions, you might want to do the same experiment with a few friends. You will quickly sense that their responses uncover truth, yes, but truth about their experience of the poem, but nothing about the poem itself, which simply is what it is.

Let me digress somewhat for one moment to explain that what I am saying about the work of literature has nothing to do with de-

ciding whether it is good or bad. Well or badly written, though, its bottom will be its top, whether it be a Harold Robbins novel or the Iliad.

Even on the issue of "badly written" versus "well written," nine out of ten times our so-called objective judgment has more to do with some received opinion by which we measure not the quality of literature, but our own worthiness and rightness. Poem X is bad because it is too sentimental. (Read: I have been taught, at some personal cost, that sentimentality is bad. If this poem is sentimental it must be bad or I don't know anything.) Poem Y is bad because it is simplistic. (Read: I have been taught, at some personal cost, that simplicity is bad, complexity good. If this poem is simple and I find it good, I admit my own simplicity. And that's bad.) And so it goes.

Once in a while, though, our negative judgment about a poem's quality may actually be based on the fact of the poem's failure to be what it alleges to be: at such time the poem may be said to be badly written. What we really mean is not that the poem is "bad"--a judgment which is as external to the work of literature as the labels "trivial" or "deep"--but that, in fact, it is no poem at all.

An analogy would be, say, to a bridge. A bridge is a bridge, period. When I say that it is a good bridge, nothing stops you from saying that it is a bad bridge. If I can drive my car across it from Staten Island to Brooklyn that proves it to be a bridge, not a good bridge. If I start to drive my car across it and I wind up in the water of the Narrows, then what I have experienced is not a bad bridge, but no bridge at all. It is a failure as a

bridge, a non-bridge, not a "bad bridge."

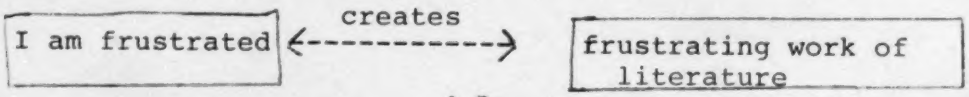
Readers over the centuries have agreed that a work of literature is that branch of writing which discloses some kind of truth (if only the author's personal experience) in a form which fully captures the essence of that truth. In other words, content and context are fully married in a work of literature. Also readers generally agree (though there are those who do not) that a work of literature illuminates areas of enduring concern for human beings and that it itself will endure. Whether or not this definition suits you, you can see that a piece of writing is, by definition, either literature or it is not. When we agree that a poem is "bad" (and when we are not falling into the pitfall I mentioned before of responding to our own received opinions), what we are really saying is that it is no poem at all: it doesn't get the cars to Brooklyn. For example, a poem which blindly passes on the author's own received opinion while alleging to disclose some fresh truth may be said to be no poem at all. We generally, however, simply say that it is "badly written." Another example: the writer may self-consciously think that he or she ought to use flowery diction or sprinkle abstractions into the work or show off special knowledge or what have you. All of this ego-projection will show too and will deflect us from an authentic experience of truth. In other words, the poet may indeed create a moment of true sentimentality, reflecting what's what about sentimentality. But if he or she writes flowery or purple language for its own sake, what I will experience as reader is "flowery language for its own sake," rather than the alleged meaning of the poem. That's not literature. In what we call "good" writing one finds no self-

consiousness of the sort that distracts from communication. Another example: a poet can clearly fail to do what she or he plainly sets out to do. The poet may bungle the very rhythm established by the poem or may mismanage the metaphors so disastrously as to cause laughter where tears were clearly intended. A poetaster can be so ego-bound that the product parades itself as a POEM (as often happens when teachers force students to write poetry). At such a time no true experience speaks through the words and the result is no work of literature. Our shorthand of this situation is to call it "bad." End of digression.

So where are we? At the obvious. A hard poem is hard for the reader for whom it is hard. A poem is deep (easy, moving, sincere, etc.) for her or him for whom it is deep (easy, moving, sincere, etc.). A hard poem is one I do not get; a deep poem is one about which I think or feel deeply. In other words, a poem reads me as much as I read it. The poem creates me to the exact degree that I apprehend it. Or to quote Sartre: "Every consciousness exists to the exact extent to which it is conscious of existing."

We start off with a work of literature and a reader, each "creating" the other:

Then we experience whatever comes up for us about the work and "create" these feelings, judgments, and attitudes in the work of literature as it returns the favor simultaneously to us:



Or: The poem is confusing; I am confused. The poem is shallow, I am not challenged (that is, am forced to be shallow). The poem is tedious; I'm bored. Yet, the poem is only the poem. Everything else is me. I say, "'Thirty days hath September' is a useful device for learning the number of days in each month." Notice that "Thirty days hath September" is merely "Thirty days hath September," while "...is a useful device for learning the number of days in each month" is me--all me.

Now look. Occasionally I experience a moment of true wonderment with a work of literature. When the work is perfectly clear, true, and beautiful, so am I. Isn't this true? When I get it, when I totally apprehend Anna Karenina, Long Day's Journey into Night, or an Auden poem, I am truly pleased and experience great satisfaction. Note that I am also at the bottom of the work of literature.

What I find at the bottom (and at the top) are two things--it itself and me myself. When I begin in frustration, the so-called surface of the work (say, the first fifty pages of Anna Karenina) is frustrating. When I totally apprehend the work, it is illuminating. I am at the bottom of literature illuminating it. In a crucial sense (the crucial sense that makes my "opinion" valuable) my total apprehension is the bottom of literature. Literature speaks to me only by speaking through me, speaks to me only when it has become my own voice. Paradoxically, but truly, the poem which is always clear and complete cannot become clear and complete without me. It needs me. Furthermore I become truly myself at the moment of appropriation. I put my ego aside for the moment. Judgments and considerations are momentarily shelved. My mind sans ego merges with the poem. Here is the process: The "tedious" poem

was my tedium; the "surface" of literature was my resistance; the "layers" of literature have been my shucking of my own defenses; ultimately, the bottom of literature is my clarity. Nothing is ever hidden; it all shows, like the moons of Jupiter. When I see what is to be seen, I am truly experiencing myself too. That is, all of me is involved in a total experience. I am really alive. I don't need literature in order to feel like me and literature does not need me to be itself. Nonetheless, it finds life in me. I find life in it.

I wish now to make what I expect has been very obvious even more obvious by asking a few rhetorical questions. I will also answer them.

Question: What is at the bottom of a work of literature?

Answer: The piece itself brought into clarity by a reader truly reading it.

Question: What can one do in order to get to the bottom of a work of literature?

Answer: Uncloud one's mind. One clouds one's mind by not really reading. Here are some ways we cloud our minds: by analyzing, figuring it out, feeling bored, stupid, superior, etc., judging, and the like. One can only read by reading, reading, reading, even if that means ignoring one's emotions, critical abilities, and evaluations. Only by truly seeing what's there can one find oneself at the bottom of a work of literature.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION (optional)

Question: What's the value of seeing to the bottom of literature? Why bother?

Answer: What you get is total clarity on what's what for the author at the moment of artistic illumination. The light of illumination shines on (in) you too. At that moment in all that light you are given to yourself. With your ego shelved and your mind merged with the work of art, you have the rare experience of being perfectly clear. You become transparent to yourself. For a moment you know who you are and time stops. For an instant the perfection of the world stands forth.

Now I wish to offer a warning: no teacher, no matter how brilliantly in touch with a work of literature, can tell a student what's at the bottom of the work. The bottom of literature is its lucidity for the reader reading. The illumination cannot be conveyed in other words. If I tell a student what's at the bottom of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" what the student has is a statement about my experience of the poem. Now look. If I am truly turned on by my illumination and if the student truly trusts me, the best that can happen is that the student will get to the bottom of my exclamations about the literature. the student will create his or her clarity in association with me and my illumination. Sure, for a moment the student's world will stand forth in its perfection. The student will have the experience of merging--not however, with the poem, but rather with me. When such an event happens in class, nothing "bad" has happened. It must,however, not be confused with reading. The student may have had a wonderful experience and a true one, but he or she has not read a work of literature, has not gotten to the bottom of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." There is one

way and only one way to get to the bottom of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and that is by personally appropriating it. There is no other way. It seems to me that a teacher of literature will be strengthened by remembering this. If what a student shares all term is the teacher's illuminations, the course will be exceedingly satisfying, but the student may still have all his or her difficulties with apprehending literature. Many courses of the kind I am describing will lead the student toward loving school, not literature.

I wish to close by sharing with you two practical ways of helping students get to the bottom of literature. All I can do in the short space alloted is mention them. I cannot, of course, prove here that they work nor can I reveal their inner dynamics. Mainly what I can do is leave you with a brief outline of some practical methods which grow from the kind of theorizing I have been doing here. I hasten to add that these are my present ways, certainly not THE WAY or even the way I may be using a year from now.

Both methods are components of what I call "listening". The point behind my use of both methods is simple: they are classroom methods wholly rooted in experience, rather than in concepts, beliefs, logic, reasonableness, and the like. They give the student a chance to participate in the experience of apprehending the heart of a work of literature, replacing it with the direct experience itself.

I have taken the first form of "listening" from the insights of phenomenology, especially, though not exclusively, the brilliant contributions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. (What I recently read in some remarks by my friend Dr.Jack Rains applies as well to me: I was one of those readers Merleau-Ponty

describes who had "the impression, on reading Husserl and Heidegger, not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what they had been waiting for." But you do not have to lecture your students on the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger in order to use this approach in class!)

As the class and I discuss the work of literature, I wait for the first problem to arise. It can be anything: a character (Henderson), a phrase ("Men. Men. Wheat. Wheat."), a stage direction ("mechanically"), an element of plot (circularity), a theme ("unrequited love"), a concept ("the spoiled child"), etc. I immediately bracket it, literally, by putting it on the board. What goes inside the brackets is that which we must listen to until we "hear" what it has to say about itself; that and that alone goes into the brackets--"Henderson" or "Men. Men. Wheat. Wheat." And so on. What is left outside the brackets is everything else in the known universe. What is left out is every judgment, every cause (this is particularly important), every effect, every influence from the world, every biographical fact, however important in its own right, every means, every end, every feeling, everything. For example, if "Henderson" is bracketed, what is left out--that is, not discussed--is Bellow, evaluations of the novel or of Henderson or the style, notions about why Bellow wrote the character, influences on Bellow, Bellow's influence on others, Henderson's influence on other characters in modern literature, everything that can be said, however truly, about the novel genre or about narration or style or personas, every strategy of fiction which made "Henderson" possible, and everything that I or the class or critics or anyone else in the known world, now or ever, feel or could feel

about this Henderson. The only thing in the brackets is what has come up as a problem in class. On the board it looks like this: [HENDERSON]. Husserl said, "Back to the things themselves," implying that a thing, a phenomenon, can be fully understood in and of itself without recourse to causation. That's what we do in class. We "listen" to what the phenomenon in the brackets has to say for itself. Naturally the phenomenon has to speak through the verbalizing of the class, those who are "listening" to it.

As I have shown, the bottom of a work of literature is illuminated only when a reader fully apprehends the meaning of the work during a process which clarifies the reader's aliveness simultaneously. Readers can talk their way to this clarity--to their "bottom" and the work's--by sharing their experience of the bracketed phenomenon. My colleague Gloria Orenstein has reminded me of Gertrude Stein's statement (in "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans"): "Many things then come out in the repeating that make a history of each one for any one who always listens to them. Many things come out of each one and as one listens to them listens to all the repeating in them, always this comes to be clear about them, always this comes to be clear about them, the history of them of the bottom nature in them, the nature or natures mixed up in them to make the whole of them in anyway it mixes up in them."

I say to the class, "Don't 'think about' Henderson. Just 'listen' to the phenomenon. What does the phenomenon known as 'Henderson' say to you?" Here is what a short patch of in-class dialogue could look like.

Student: I hear that Henderson is something like Henchard in Hardy's novel.

Teacher: Thank you, but neither Henchard nor Hardy nor novels are within the brackets. What do you hear from within the brackets?

Student: But only Henderson is inside the brackets. And Henderson is Henderson!

Teacher: OK. Put your momentary frustration on the shelf and listen to that Henderson. What's what with Henderson?

Student: Well, I "hear" that he is a driven, compulsive person.

Teacher: OK. I hear that too. Now we have in the brackets--[Henderson: driven, compulsive]. What do you hear in all that?

Student: Ah, I "hear" that Henderson is a slave to his drives.

Teacher: Far out. Now in the brackets we "hear"--[Henderson: slave to his drives and compusions]. What do you "hear" in that?

On this process goes, with all the students listening, until a moment when all participants (including the instructor who most likely has never listened to this particular phenomenon before either) experience what can only be called <u>total satisfaction based on complete certainty</u>. (I say this phrase without embarrassment and with unending thanks to Edmund Husserl.) What I am saying is that instructor and class stick with this process as long as it takes for each and every participant to experience total satisfaction. It usually occurs for everyone within seconds of each other. At that precise moment everyone has gotten to the bottom of the phenomenon. The slowly expanding consciousness in the room has finally heard exactly what there is to hear from "Henderson." Not only has the phenomenon stood forth in all its clarity, but it has become a

well-lit tunnel carved through our own denseness, confusion, self-doubt and ignore-ance (all outside the brackets, goodness knows) right to the heart of the novel. To know entirely what there is to know about the character Henderson discloses the organic structure of the book as a whole: Henderson is a pound of flesh from Henderson the Rain King. Any important phenomenon from any work of literature, if bracketed and listened to until the moment of total satisfaction, will create that well-lit tunnel to the heart of the previously obscure work. Our English word for the creation of such an illuminated route is "in-sight," an experience requiring no analysis or judgements. So, "listening" to isolated phenomena is one kind of listening a group can do if it wants to get to the bottom of a work of literature.

The second approach has been greatly influenced by the teachings of Werner Erhard and EST. Here it is.

The class is discussing a work of literature, say Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Let's say they stumble on the line "Let be be finale of seem." No one in the class sees that the line means itself. No one is hearing the line. No one is satisfied. In fact at this moment each student has gone into his or her characteristic form of unconsciousness: Sheldon is feeling stupid and knows he doesn't belong in college; Karen is dutifully "trying to figure it out" and is going in circles or rather spirals of increasing distraction; Sylvia is hating modern poetry and especially Stevens; Nancy is bored and is having trouble staying awake; Tom is above it all, judging the others in class as dumb clods; Pat is getting turned on by Tom's thigh; Nancy is dying to say (once again) what the lines "means to me and everyone is entitled to their own opinion";

I am panicking that my class is going down the tube; and so on around the room. In short, everyone is "hearing" his or her own blocks and insecurities rather than "Let be be finale of seem." Now, the line means itself and can find expression only through the true experience of readers. Each person can only hope to get to the line by unblocking and truly reading it. So "listening" method #2 involves directing attention away from blocks and listening to each other until the speaker in the classroom is "heard." This means listening until one experiences certainty as to what the speaker is saying; it does not necessitate agreement or disagreement.

Brave Sylvia manages to utter what she "hears" in Stevens' line. I then ask the class, "Who 'heard' Sylvia?" (What's happening, of course, is that I am putting Sylvia's utterance within brackets, but I don't call it that.) If no one heard her, I ask her to repeat herself. She does, of course modifying and emending what she had said at first about the line. Then I ask again, "Who 'heard' Sylvia?" Tom says, "I did." "OK, Tom," I say, "Tell Sylvia what you heard her say." Tom does. Sylvia retorts, "That's not exactly what I said." "Fine," I say, "Tell us again, Sylvia. Tell us exactly what you want us to hear about this line of poetry." (I read it aloud again.) She does so, modifying, emending, refining what she has been saying about Stevens' line, forgetting to worry about it, forgetting to feel blocked. She's looked at it again and is much clearer now as to what it says than she was at first. So she once again says what's what for her about "Let be be finale of seem." "Who 'heard' Sylvia?" I ask. You see, now fewer people are resisting the line of poetry; instead they are listening to and partici-

pating in its emerging meaning through Sylvia's utterance. The flow is toward certainty. "Who has 'heard' Sylvia?" "I did," says Pat and shares what she has 'heard.' "Almost!" shouts Sylvia, laughing, not hating modern poetry at all. She's happy now; she has experienced certainty about the line and knows what she knows. Everyone is listening and alert. "Say it again, Sylvia!" three people yell at once. Sylvia glances at the perfectly clear line, gathers her resources, and verbalizes its exact meaning with precision and clarity. "I heard it": Pat. "I got it!": Tom. "Oh wow": Sheldon. "OK, Sheldon," say I, "Tell Sylvia what you heard her say." Sheldon does and simultaneously everyone participating experiences keen satisfaction, understands Sylvia, gets to the bottom of the line, and opens a personal, well-lit tunnel into the heart of the poem.

All along the route toward the moment of gratification, the class--as Sylvia knows more and more what's true about the line--experiences rising excitement because they sense themselves getting closer and closer. No one has the "answer," including the teacher. The answer emerges through the receding bricabrac of one's own obfuscations. What is actually happening is that little by little the students are causing their own self-created blocks to vanish and are reading what was always there to be read. Almost always someone says something like, "Oh my God, how could I have missed that?" Or "For Chrissake, I knew that but just didn't trust my own opinion."

What I wish to emphasize is that no "thinking about" the poem occurred, no analysis, no dissection, no application of concepts about poetry, art, life, modern psychology, etc.--in short, none

of those activities which are their own true reward but which, nine times in ten, stand in the way of insight intc the work of literature itself. No one need ever be wrong in class. What I tell my class is that there is plenty of time to "think about" the poem once they have experienced it. "Thinking about it" is too often a way we have of not experiencing literature.

These are the two listening procedures I employ in my classes. They are often interrelated since all "listening" is equivalent to "bracketing," all "bracketing" equivalent to "listening." I do one or the other as problems arise in the discussion. I know when a problem arises because at that moment, I stop "hearing" what's happening in the class. My goal remains forever the same: to get to the bottom of the work of literature. Let me end with the obvious once again--I do not always achieve the goal I have set. "Let be be finale of seem."

Quoted Material

1. The lines by Robert Frost comprise his poem "The Span of Life" (c) H. R. W. The Poetry of Robert Frost, 1909.

1. Barbara Howes. "Landscape, Deer Season" from Looking Up At The Leaves. Publ. Knopf. (c) Barbara Howes.